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✓ Less talk, more action

As a statewide community, our desire to see our children educated thoroughly is something of an irresistible force. And our limited ability to fund that education with tax dollars from residents who already pay too much to government on too many levels — well, that's an immovable object.

And what happens when an irresistible force hits an immovable object? Apparently, in Rhode Island, a whole lot of talk.

For years now, there's been talk about whether we need so many school districts, and the overhead that all their administrations and infrastructures carry. There have been arguments and debates over teacher contracts — over whether they're negotiated well, and whether the state might not be better off with a unified statewide contract instead. Can't we save money and maybe even improve service with a statewide health care contract? There's been a lot of talk about that too. How about a predictable, fair funding mechanism? Talk, talk, talk.

And how about solving the logistical crisis caused by increasingly demanding (and increasingly expensive) state and federal mandates, even as the state's willingness to help fund local districts falls short, and even as municipalities are handcuffed by legislation aimed at preventing them from spiking taxes (while, paradoxically, sometimes encouraging them to do so)?

There's really been a whole lot of talk about that. In fact, that talk has gotten awfully loud lately.

There's plenty of talk. There doesn't seem to be, from most sectors of government, a whole lot of real action.

It's not hard to see why — meaningful change in the way we fund education means making decisions that are going to anger constituents. No one wants to give up the sense of home rule local districts suggest. Statewide contract negotiations could undermine a lot of union power; statewide health care contracts could be better for some but worse for others. Changes that spread the financial burden around more mean some people would take on burdens they haven't before. It's a political hot potato. There's no way to address it and still keep everyone happy; and those who are made unhappy are exactly the types who'll become very vocally so, to the point of serious political liability — parents, local politicians and union leaders.

House Finance Committee Chairman Steven M. Costantino has announced a new workgroup to study the public funding of education in an effort to develop legislation next year to improve the system. In a press statement, several of his colleagues seem eagerly optimistic to really turn things around.

Let's hope it's not all just talk.